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Tour & Taxis

Lisa De Visscher

In 15 years, Tour & Taxis has grown from an abandoned customs area into a fully fledged new neighbourhood. In the master plan of Bureau Bas Smets, new homes and office buildings are given a place next to emblematic historical heritage such as the Royal Depot and the Gare Maritime. A large park, sports infrastructure and the Brasserie de la Senne make this district a new centre in Brussels.



→ Master plan by Bureau Bas Smets

- 1 Royal Depot
- 2 Sheds
- 3 Gare Maritime
- 4 Residential buildings
- 5 Herman Teirlinck building
- 6 Laefmilieu Brussel Bruxelles Environnement
- 7 Brasserie de la Senne

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a then still young Belgium constructed a free port area in the heart of its capital. It was an enterprise that did little to hide its economic ambitions. Tour & Taxis comprised the largest freight station in Europe, an impressive customs building, a gigantic post office, and an almost 100-metre-long royal depot in a walled and controlled zone next to the canal. Thanks to its central location, it was able to serve a particularly strategic area.

The site lost its raison d'être in the 1980s due to the establishment of the customs union. In early 2000, after years of vacancy and decay, the large and strategically located 30-hectare site was purchased by three developers: Ackermans & van Haaren, Stak Rei, and Iret. The royal depot was renovated and brought into use in 2004. The rest of the site would languish for another ten years, however, until Extensa Group (Ackermans & van Haaren) purchased the terrains owned by their fellow developer and began to speed up the development plans.

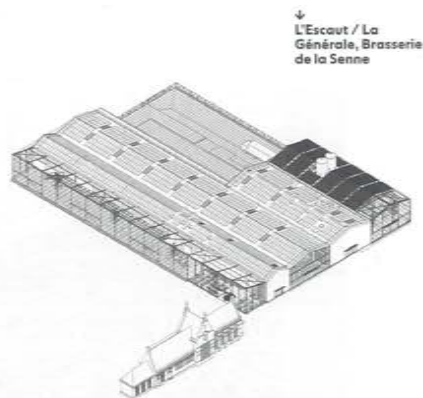
The first challenge was to break open the site's closed character. For this purpose, a master plan was drawn up in 2015 for an area of 20 hectares, almost half of which was given over to a new public park – the largest to be laid out in Brussels since the nineteenth century – designed by Bureau Bas Smets. The new Picard bridge over the canal, on which construction will start this year, will provide quick pedestrian access to the Northern Quarter.

The master plan provided, on the one hand, for the redevelopment of the historical buildings on site – the Gare Maritime into retail units and offices, the Hôtel des Douanes into a 100-room boutique hotel, and the Hôtel de la Poste into a conference centre – and, on the other hand, for the development of a series of new buildings with an underground car park for 3,500 cars. Two office buildings have already been constructed: the BEL (popularly known as the 'toaster'), designed by Cepezed and Philippe Samyn and Partners and home to the offices of Brussels Environment, and the Herman Teirlinck building, which has housed the Flemish Government administrative offices since 2017 and was designed by Neutelings Riedijk Architects.

Several residential schemes are currently under construction: the Riva project by Architectes Associés on the Picard bridge, which is yet to be built, contains 139 apartments and promises luxurious homes with views of the canal. Following a competition, a residential care centre and 220 apartments were awarded to noAarchitecten, Sergison Bates architects and AWG. These are currently under construction just behind the Gare Maritime. 'We still have a potential of 1,000 residential units, or rather 85,000 m², that can be realized', says Peter De Durpel, the COO of Extensa. 'On the triangular car park next to the BEL, the master plan provides for another 150-metre-high tower with offices and/or a hotel. It was originally intended to house the Flemish Government offices, but as they will eventually move into the WTC towers, we are currently looking at other possibilities.'

The new avenue between Avenue du Port and the residential area was divided into several concessions at the instigation of the Brussels Government Architect. The first of these is the Citroën-Peugeot garage, which is now open. There will also be a drinks wholesaler – a programme that accords with

the ambition to integrate more manufacturing industries within the residential and office blocks in the Canal Zone – and finally the Brasserie de la Senne, designed by L'Escaut / La Générale, which is currently nearing completion. Extensa also created a logistics hub in this area: a storage and distribution centre that offloads goods from articulated lorries and, using lighter electric cars or cargo bikes, distributes them to the various companies on the site. By the park, a 1-hectare area has been coloured in for public facilities with possibly a new school and sports infrastructure.



↓ L'Escaut / La Générale, Brasserie de la Senne



↓ noA - awg - Sergison Bates, residential buildings in zone C

Through these programmes, the Tour & Taxis site, which was still on the 'wrong side of the canal' in the late 1990s, once again demonstrates the same level of ambition that formed the basis of its existence a century ago, and thus resolutely claims its place within Brussels' ambitious development plan.▲■

'The capital of a nation, let alone of a grand and visionary collection of nations, should be an inspiring place that leads by example, not just in politics but in urban planning and design. Such a place should be a showcase for what is good and right. Which is why Brussels, for me, is a massive facepalm. To be completely honest, if I have to go to the city for work, there is no registered increase in activity in the ventral tegmental area of my brain – basically, the part of my brain that controls pleasure. From an urban planning and transport perspective, Brussels is useful. It is, in effect, a museum of failed urban-planning practices, outdated traffic engineering copy-pasted from the Americans in the 1950s, and techniques prioritizing cars over people.'

I have friends in the city. I know cool bars and restaurants on quiet European streets. But the Big Picture of Brussels doesn't instil in me a sense of urban awe and wonder. Even when looking at an architecturally impressive building in the city centre, you simply can't unsee the traffic, the lack of best-practice bicycle infrastructure or the stunted growth of vibrant street life. The capital of Belgium and Europe is barely recognizable as Europe. You'll find me at the Central Station, waiting for a train to Antwerp.'

Mikael Colville-Andersen ^{DK}

Mikael Colville-Andersen (b. 1968, Canada) is a Canadian-Danish urban designer and urban mobility expert. He is the CEO of Copenhagenize Design Co., and he works with cities and governments around the world in coaching them towards becoming more bicycle friendly. He is the host of the urbanism TV documentary series 'The Life-Sized City'.

Kicking the car habit

Laurent Vermeersch

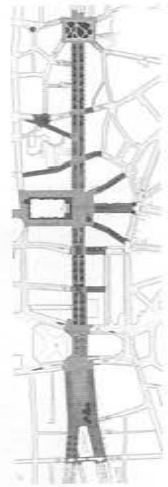
Few European cities have embraced the car as enthusiastically as Brussels. After decades of muddling through, there is at long last a policy shift towards alternative mobility and a redistribution of the public space. Yet there is still a long way to go, and with political decisiveness in short supply, the key impulse often comes from the bottom up.



Bureau des Smets © Michel De Clerck

You are not stuck in traffic. You are traffic. This was one of the slogans that emerged in the summer of 2012 during the campaigns organized by 'Picnic The Streets', a citizen movement that was fighting for a car-free Place de la Bourse, the beating heart of the city.

A few well-attended picnics in the middle of the public road attested to the growing awareness amongst more and more Brussels residents that things simply couldn't go on as they were in their city. Brussels was usually doing well in the wrong city lists, such as those with the worst traffic jams. A wider context of strong population growth and the continuing importance of work-related commuting fed into the doomsday scenario of total gridlock.



The picnickers' message was heard loud and clear and the next city administration oversaw the creation of a large pedestrian area. Not only did Place de la Bourse become traffic free, but also a significant section of the Anspachlaan. When the tram was moved underground in the 1970s, this road was laid out as a four-lane highway cutting straight through the city centre. At its far ends, the Fontainasplein and

Place de Brouckère were also slated for redesign. The city authorities claimed that together with the existing car-free streets around the Grand-Place, this was now one of the largest pedestrian zones in Europe.

In the meantime, the construction works are nearing completion and no one wants to go back to the days of the city motorway. Nevertheless, this was a hard-won revolution. The first temporary interventions provoked a raft of criticism and even legal proceedings, but all in all, despite these obstacles and the tardy start to the redevelopment work, the principle held up well. A few concessions were made, but there proved to be scant political will to turn back the clock.

The pedestrian zone in the city centre garnered the most media attention. Now, however, steps have also been taken elsewhere in the city towards a different kind of mobility and reclaiming the public space from the car. The Reyers Viaduct in Schaarbeek was demolished and places such as the Parvis in Saint-Gilles and the Koningin Astridplein in Jette were transformed from car parks into multifunctional squares in which residents and visitors can meet.

In the latter case, the metamorphosis also went hand in hand with the construction of a new tramline, which proved an overnight success. After years of political deadlock, a tram was ultimately *not* introduced on Chaussée d'Ixelles, but the second most important shopping street only became vehicle-restricted. Other major roads were left undisturbed but generous cycle lanes were added. One was built along the Inner Ring road, for example.

The city also gained some new parks, chiefly in the densely built-up neighbourhoods along the canal, such as the Parc de la Senne and the green network on and around the site of Tour & Taxis. At the Porte de Ninove, until recently a sinister no man's land, a new park is currently under construction.

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SOM Projects © Beliris



Bureau Bos Smets © Michel De Clerck

In the meantime, further new plans are being drawn up and citizen movements are keeping the status of the car firmly on the political agenda, in terms of both traffic safety and, in particular, air pollution. This has led to the creation of a growing number of 30 km/h zones and several streets will probably be closed to cars at the beginning and end of the school day. After residents came up with an idea to this end, Saint-Gilles' new local authority is even keen to outlaw all through traffic from an entire neighbourhood around Brussels South Station. This will offer a foretaste of the new regional mobility plan entitled 'Good Move', part of whose remit is to create more liveable neighbourhoods.

It is not as though Brussels is suddenly abandoning cars altogether. The Bois de la Cambre, one of the city's largest parks, still acts as an entry and exit road to and from the capital as an extension of Avenue Louise. Monuments such as the Cinquantenaire or the Palace of Justice are still being misused as car parks. A large number of dated traffic tunnels, which according to experts are the equivalent of rolling out a red carpet to cars, are also being renovated and will therefore continue to be used for decades to come, at a minimum.

Furthermore, a series of ambitious plans for the public space are proving very slow to get off the ground, such as the redesign of Avenue de la Toison d'Or, another important shopping street, or Rond-point Schuman in the European Quarter.

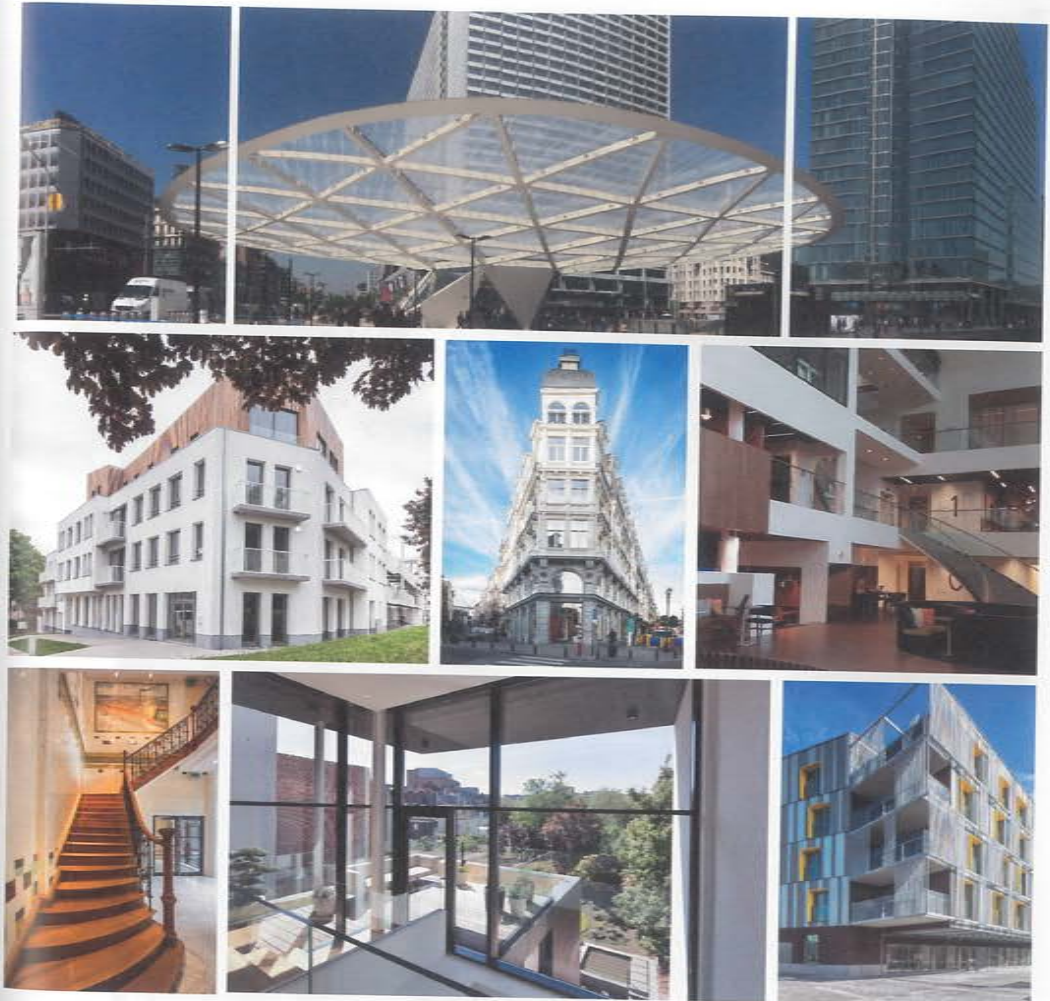
Despite the evident progress, much remains to be done if Brussels wants to keep up with international front-runners. Admittedly, the city has already come a long way. Indeed, few European cities have embraced the age of the car so enthusiastically. In the lead-up to the 1958 world fair, in particular, Brussels was equipped with new, car-based infrastructure in record time. At the time, this represented the height of modernity and played a starring role in the run-up to the expo, which crystal-

ized Belgium's post-war ambitions. Belgium aspired to be the crossroads of the Western world, literally.

The political will and rapid decision-making of that era stand in stark contrast to today's slowly-dawning realization of the car's problematic encroachment upon the city. Although minds are gradually focussing on the issues, the cultural shift is by no means complete and it is often still citizen initiatives that act as the catalyst for change. If decisions are made, putting them into practice can often still prove a major ordeal. This is sometimes due to a lack of political courage, but the complicated structure of the Brussels and Belgian governments are also to blame.

Brussels comprises 19 municipalities, each with its own mayor and councillor for mobility and public works. All too often the various agencies of the Brussels-Capital Region, which since its foundation in 1989 has gradually sought to increase its power, work alongside one another rather than together. Moreover, because of the poor financial situation, many projects are dependent upon federal funding. Mobility policy is also hopelessly fragmented between the different regions and the federal government. But collaboration is essential if Brussels is to get a grip on the key commuting flows from Flanders and Wallonia. ▲■

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Brussels, urban governance for a metropolis

Lisa De Visscher

Over a period of 30 years, the Brussels-Capital Region has evolved from a body responsible for regulation to a player that is shaping a metropolis. In addition to the municipalities that supervise and direct many projects, the Region is also seizing the initiative when it comes to large-scale urban development. What instruments does it use to ensure that spatial quality takes precedence over political and economic interests? What are the merits of 'soft-power mechanisms for design improvement' and in which kind of climate can they thrive?



Canal Zone BWP © ORGZ - Bas Smets

The Brussels-Capital Region is a relatively young entity. It did not become a fully fledged region until 1989, when it took its place alongside its Flemish and Walloon counterparts. In just 30 years, however, the Region has been compelled to develop a robust policy by which to address the challenges faced by many cities: strong demographic growth, increasing multiculturalism, challenging mobility, and a lack of services. The complex political and administrative structure, also known as the 'Brussels lasagna', does not make the situation any easier: in addition to the Region, there is also, on the one hand, federal level involvement, and, on the other, 19 municipalities, two (linguistic) communities and a series of agencies.

Urbanism and urban planning are powerful tools for lending a face to a policy. Yet they can only make a difference if the ultimate goal, namely the quality of the built environment, is championed over the economic and political interests that inevitably play a role in every large-scale urban project. In order to safeguard this quality, the Region created the office of Brussels Government Architect (BMA: *Bouwmeester/Maitre Architecte*) in 2009, thereby following the examples of the Flemish Government Architect and the City Architect in Antwerp. The role of the Government Architect, however, was not a random development. During the first decade of the new millennium, several large municipalities such as Molenbeek, Forest and Schaerbeek, among others, worked on an architectural policy which, whether through Neighbourhood Contracts or in collaboration with the regional administration, formed the basis of an interesting contemporary patrimony. Here, too, the need for a Government Architect who could take a global approach was raised time and time again.

The Government Architect's principal task is to support clients with regard to architectural quality, urban planning and public space. The Government Architect operates independently

of all other urban-development services and can thus work across the board. The importance of this transverse approach should not be underestimated. From an independent and neutral position, the Government Architect has the opportunity to talk to the various authorities and services and to gather their representatives around the table. As the overseer of quality during these discussions, it is up to the Government Architect to always advocate the theme of spatial quality and to test the projects in terms of their integration into the urban fabric, functionality and user-friendliness. Good governance, therefore, is about developing the right tools so that these discussions not only happen effectively, but also contribute to a generally accepted definition of what spatial quality actually means.

The first Brussels Government Architect was Olivier Bastin, who held the post between 2009 and 2014. He laid the foundations for the Government Architect's task by concentrating on competition procedures and the selection of designers. In so doing, he set the tone for a positive architectural climate. As the first Government Architect, he also forged the initial links between the multiple players. 'The biggest challenge was to overcome the resistance caused by an established climate of mistrust between the different levels of power', says Bastin. 'In principle, the Brussels-Capital Region is the dominant party, but when you realize that the City of Brussels holds a larger budget than the Region, the balance of power is a little more complex. For more peripheral municipalities such as Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, Uccle or Woluwe, the Region is like a difficult mother-in-law who imposes social housing quotas. And talking to Flanders about, for example, the Canal Zone on the border with Vilvoorde, ultimately proved to be impossible.'

For a long time, the fragmentation of the various levels of power was also reflected in the Region's spatial policy. It did not develop any

major projects during the first 20 years of its existence, let alone an overall structural plan. The development of larger sites, such as the European Quarter or the surroundings of the South Station, always ended up being the sum of many small or independent projects without a clear coherent story. This absence of grand projects is striking in comparison with other key European cities. A lack of global vision caused by a fragmented decision-making system only partly explains the situation. Brussels suffered extensively in the aftermath of radical large-scale post-war urban development projects such as the North-South link, the Northern Quarter, the Administrative Centre or the administrative towers on Place De Brouckère, which are still experienced as deeply traumatic. These schemes, which were accompanied by a process of demolition, expropriation and destructive land speculation, led to a distinct lack of support for greater urban-development projects during the first decades of the newly established Region. Given this climate, it is logical that an instrument called the Neighbourhood Contract was developed, a four-year programme for the urban revitalization of deprived neighbourhoods. As Mathieu Berger writes in *Le Temps d'une politique*³, the Neighbourhood Contract became an 'emblematic instrument in Brussels' government actions as a structural and structuring policy'. The twenty-fifth anniversary of this instrument, however, is also an occasion to acknowledge its limitations and to reiterate the need for a transformation of the policy.

'For 25 years, [the Region] has experienced a strong dynamic of urban renewal, in particular through the Neighbourhood Contracts (...) and has attracted the interest of private investors. But the various public and private initiatives are not yet working towards a common project or a well-considered overall vision': this is the motto of the 2014-2019 Brussels Coalition Agreement. And that has to change. The po-

litical ambition is to work on a larger scale and across borders. This is reflected in a series of new measures that came into effect during the previous legislative term: now, more than ever, the government has turned the Canal Zone into a priority area and also launched 10 new priority development poles 'which require a global and transversal strategy in order to advance local development opportunities in the short and medium term'.³ The poles are: Schaerbeek-Formation and Tour & Taxis sites, which are complementary to the development of the Canal Zone, Heysel, Reyers, Southern Quarter, West Station site, Josaphat, Delta-Vorstlaan, the barracks sites in Etterbeek and Ixelles, the prison sites in Saint-Gilles and Forest, Avenue Leopold III and the NATO site. The traditional Neighbourhood Contracts have been extended to include five Urban Renewal Contracts that gather a number of much larger actors and, as such, also transcend the boundaries of the municipalities.⁴ In order to manage this, the administration was also restructured. To this end, the government wanted to develop a territorial platform in which the myriad existing players could be grouped into two levels: one for planning and one for execution.⁵ In the end, a third tier was added and today we have three agencies: Perspective.brussels drawing up the plans, the Urban Development Corporation (SAU/MSI) buying and developing the land, and Urban.brussels granting the permits and managing the historical patrimony.

'The government has placed an important focus on territorial development during this legislative term', says Bety Wajnne, director of Urban.brussels. 'The reform of the Brussels Urban Planning Code, which came into force in September, also fits into this picture. This reform will simplify procedures and speed up the case management process. Of course, this is only possible if the administration is up to the job. Hence the whole administrative reorganization that preceded it.'

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The second Government Architect, Kristiaan Borret, who leaves office this year, took up his post just as the new legislation came into effect. He says: 'There is a clear evolution in the vision and policy of the Region, which dares to think on a large scale once again. The resources are on the table. I want to tackle this large scale within a transverse project-based operation.' Unlike in the past, when a project was transferred from one department to another, according to the stage it had reached, the divisions between the three above bodies are now gradually being removed. The staff from the various departments are consistently collaborating on the projects in hand. The 'Canal team' – a collaboration between Perspective, Urban, SAU/MSI and the BMA – is a pioneer of this new way of working. It was assembled after Alexandre Chemetoff had devised the urban development plan for the Canal Zone. 'I pleaded for the emancipation of the administration and for capacity-building within that administration. A government needs an external urban planner to formulate a plan, but it must then be able to apply it itself', says Borret. Thanks to this transverse approach, it has not only become possible to work quickly, but also efficiently and transparently. A developer who arrives for a meeting will immediately find all the key people at the table, including those from the research-by-design department and the people responsible for issuing the permits, for example. In recent years, the results have been reflected in the dynamics within the Canal Zone.

This work method did not come about without a struggle and it is still being resisted by some administrations. It seems astonishing, given that it accords with the coalition agreement and that all the administrations involved report to the minister-president (Rudi Vervoort, Socialist Party). The transverse, project-oriented approach is replicated in the formula of the 'project group' that is now being

applied to a series of schemes. The next step is to extend the interlocutors within this project group to include Brussels Mobility and Brussels Environment. In Borret's view: 'This is essential for some projects. The project group for the Hermann-Debroux urban renewal contract includes the demolition of a viaduct. In this case, it's logical that Brussels, too, should sit down at the table to discuss mobility.'

The Urban Renewal Contracts (CRU), such as the one for the Hermann-Debroux project, are a collaboration between Perspective and Urban (as extensions of the traditional Neighbourhood Contracts). In addition to the schemes at the neighbourhood level, the government has also invested in ten new priority development poles. Says Waknine: 'This shift in scale also demands new instruments. In place of the former *schéma directeur* [master plan], the PAD has been developed [*plan d'aménagement directeur*, or master development plan]. This not only formulates the strategic vision of the site, but can also, if desired, combine it with a regulatory framework. This is useful, for example, if a specific programme mix is required on a particular site. Perspective is currently working on a series of PADs. The purpose of this instrument is to develop a particular area more quickly and efficiently.'

One of the spearheads of the coalition agreement is the development of the Canal Zone and the strengthening of the waterway as an important structuring spatial figure. Since the coherent design of the public space is a decisive factor in the perception of this spatial figure, Kristiaan Borret proposed that an Image Quality Plan (BKP) should be drawn up for this space. The competition for this task was won by the team assembled by ORG2 and Bureau Bas Smets. The above competition became the basis for a handbook, known as the 'guidelines', which were once more elaborated by a transversal team. It was approved at the end of March 2019. The recommendations give

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Brussels Beer Project © Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen

shape to an overarching vision for public space within the entire Canal Zone and ensure that it can be consistently applied to each new project. Metrolab Brussels, an interdisciplinary academic research group that unites various faculties of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL) and is supported by the Brussels Region through the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), dedicated a study afternoon to the BKP. At the event, the various partners working on the plan – Urban.brussels, Perspective.brussels, SAU/MSI and BMA – explained this unique collaboration.

In the coalition agreement, the Brussels Government Architect's commission was extended to public and private projects on a regional scale. In order to ensure that this is properly managed, Kristiaan Borret established a chamber to oversee the quality of building projects. This too is a transverse initiative that is primarily concerned with spatial quality. In addition to the BMA, the chamber comprises the designated official and both the political and administrative levels of the municipality. It discusses strategic construction projects for which planning permits are being sought. In contrast to the 'Quality Chambers' in other cities such as Antwerp, Ghent and Ostend, the Brussels organization does not call upon the services of any external architects. This is unfortunate, as their presence would allow the debate on spatial quality to be broadened yet further.

Such transverse discussions make a visible contribution to the quality of the final project. In the meantime, they have also been incorporated into law. The new Brussels Town Planning Code (BWRO/CoBAT) stipulates that any applicant for a permit has the right to a project meeting, which has the same composition as the quality chamber, extended with a representative of Brussels Mobility and Environment Brussels. Furthermore, for all projects exceeding 5,000 m², the applicant must also seek out

the BMA's opinion. In this way, developers are encouraged to organize a competition or a prior consultation process.

Based on the conviction that the government must be able to draw and design, Kristiaan Borret also established the Research by Design team. This design research might be reactive, in which a project developer's proposal is tested for height, density, open space, etc., but it can also be anticipative, whereby the possibilities are explored in areas that have not yet been developed. Borret elaborates further: 'Designing is about finding answers and building arguments. If you want to talk to a developer, you need those arguments to be able to jointly achieve a quality project.'

Since its creation, the Brussels-Capital Region has focused on the urban development of its territory. In the last decade, however, a shift has taken place. Whereas previously the focus was on the municipalities, the Region has increasingly started to take charge through an expansion of scale and ambition. Under the influence of successful programmes like the Neighbourhood Contracts, but also (academic) research and the arrival of the Brussels Government Architect, there has been an evolution in both the perimeters of the project areas and the mechanisms by which they are developed. After years of focusing on the regulatory framework, the transverse project-based approach is increasingly being used to discuss quality. This transformation is already bearing fruit and will continue to do so if the method of transverse conversations is continued. ▲■°

1 Mathieu Berger, *Le Temps d'une politique*, CIVRA, 2019.

2 See the Government Declaration by the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, 2014–2019, p. 33.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 100.